DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 499 EC 111 900

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TITLE Evaluation of Adolescents with Learning Problems: Practical Solutions to Traditional Problems.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future Special Education (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25 - July 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Criterion Referenced Tests; Educational Diagnosis; *Evaluation Methods; Guidelines; *Learning Disabilities; Norm Referenced Tests; *Student Evaluation

ABSTRACT

The paper presents guidelines for evaluation of learning disabled adolescents and reviews measures available for use in the diagnosis of the handicapped student. Discussed are the advantages and disadvantages of norm referenced and criterion referenced measures. A checklist for use with students suspected to have difficulties is outlined. (Author/SBH)

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of Adolescents with Learning Problems: Practical Solutions to Traditional Problems

There is a great need for screening and diagnostic tests appropriate for the secondary student. Evaluation of adolescents is particularly difficult because handicapped adolescents are very often "turned off" to any type of testing and have not learned the test-taking strategies their normal peers have developed. This paper presents guidelines for evaluation of this population and reviews measures available for use in the diagnosis of the handicapped student.

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Evaluation of Adolescents with Learning Problems: Practical Solutions to Traditional Problems

by Suzanne T. Major Ph. D.

Progress in special education, and particularly in learning disabilities, has been a long time coming to secondary schools. There is progress being made, however meager, in that just a few years ago the learning disabled adolescent was almost completely ignored. The field of learning disabilities has had a philosophy of early identification, attempting to identify and remediate learning problems in the early elementary years. Many school districts tested only primary children for high incidence placement. Those identified primary children have "gotten through" elementary school, grown up, gone on to secondary school, often along with their learning problem.

There is no question that elementary school learning disabilities teachers were trying to remediate the problems, but they have been working with administrators and teachers who are still trying to get used to the concept of learning disability. Also, these learning disabilities teachers have been working with an ever increasing and often poorly diagnosed population. These teachers are doing their best, but eighth grade comes all too soon.

A very large percentage of learning disabled students

make it to high school, then drop out. McCandless (1970) estimates that 75% of those adolescents labeled as dropouts or delinquents have reading disabilities but not necessarily low intelligence. Poremba (1975) states that early school failure is the most significant variable predictive of juvenile delinquency.

Some learning disabled students survive high school. Jim, for example, attended a "good" suburban high school. His teachers recognized his high average intelligence and his ability to learn through auditory channels. Materials were read and tape recorded for him. Jim graduated and he still couldn't read. That is not special education; it is makeshift education.

Frank also made it through high school. As he explained: "Oh yeah, I kind of wiggled around a lot. I had a great ability to wiggle around a lot of problems. Except once in awhile I had to run up across one." Frank had all kinds of "training": patched eyes, glasses, visual training, punishment, repeated grades. After high school, he failed the tests required for driving a taxicab and decided to seek further help. At age 19, he went to a private clinic where crawling and creeping, no music and special sleeping positions were prescribed. As Frank saw no progress,

he went to other specialists. At age 22, with a WAIS intelligence quotient of 115, he had worked the docks, on assembly lines, truck driving and cargo handling, but was still reading at a third grade level.

Neither Jim nor Frank, nor most learning disabled adolescents, have received any special education. In fact, they have received no real, useable education. These adolescents who are surviving are not surviving well.

The big problem relates to the fact that at both the elementary and secondary levels, educators do not yet understand the need for special education and, further, are not doing an efficient job with it. Though learning disabilities specialists remain optimistic, it must be admitted that there is no panacea. Even the smallest steps toward progress take a great deal of time, a commodity teachers rarely have.

A survey of secondary teachers indicates that the problems in secondary special education are in three basic (and traditional) areas:

1. Identification: Secondary students have not been tested, or the test results are unavailable.
2. Implementation: There are not any learning disabilities in the secondary schools. This is true in financially stable suburban districts as

well as urban schools.

3. Remediation: Regular teachers are subject matter specialists and are not trained to teach exceptional students. Further, these teachers meet with an average of 100 or more students each day and state they cannot identify individual problems much less intervene. The survey results also indicated a lack of specialized teaching materials in the content areas and a lack of time for consultation with special education personnel.

The situation described appears almost impossible. Too often, however, educators seek an instant and all-encompassing solution to problems which, in fact, require a more basic, well sequenced and likely slow approach. In this paper, only the first problem, that of identification, will be examined in detail.

Research, as well as experience, indicates that there are many difficulties inherent in testing learning disabled adolescents. These students, after years of examination and continued failure, often have developed an aversion to any testing situation. Often they lack specific test taking skills or the necessary information for dealing with the situation.

Furthermore, norm referenced tests are inappropriate

for these students. It is immediately evident that the norms are not relevant. Most are aimed at the middle group of learners and are only reliable within that range. Even when data for the exceptional student is reported, it is usually from isolated, easily available groups. There are two explanations for this lack of useful tests. First, such data is obviously expensive to obtain. Also, however, special education is not complaining or seeking to correct the problem.

Norm referenced tests provide little advantage. Most norm referenced tests cover a very limited sample of learning, and, in fact, rarely match teacher objectives. Generally the results will report only what the teacher already knows. Tests of the learning processes, which would provide more information on the learning disabled student, are again inappropriate in standardization, usually due to the age range.

Group tests, and any paper and pencil tests, are again of limited utility. Group tests rely heavily on reading skill, a deficit area for most learning disabled students. Students with fine motor or visual motor deficits are at a constant disadvantage if a written response or a machine scored form is used.

There are some solutions to these identification problems. First and most ideally, researchers in learning disabilities will develop process oriented measures normed on older students which secondary special education teachers can administer on an individual basis. This is an expensive and time consuming solution not available to teachers in the near future.

Therefore, regular secondary teachers in the content areas must use criterion referenced measurement in a refined manner. Tests must be carefully constructed so that the absolute level or quality of performance for the student is specified. Scores should be used to provide explicit information on what the student can and cannot do, and students must be evaluated only against the objective. It is important to remember that the psychometric characteristics of criterion referenced tests are unknown and, in fact, nonexistant though certainly all such tests have good content validity. (This lack of norms is likely an advantage to learning disabled students.) Also, however, teachers must realize that test construction is easier in the skill areas, more difficult in the content areas, and there is relatively little research available to guide construction of these tests.

Specifically, criterion referenced testing must be tied closely to instructional objectives written in measureable terms. As all teachers gain expertise in their specialized areas and become more familiar with P L 94-142, basic objectives for teaching should not be considered a stumbling block. Most important for the learning disabled student, the scoring and reporting system used should clearly describe strengths and weaknesses of the student with minimal emphasis placed on the number of items passed or failed. An advantage to using criterion referenced testing with normal or exceptional students lies in the fact that it is appropriate for varied purposes: pre-testing, formative, diagnostic or summative testing.

Besides improved evaluation instruments and use of criterion referenced tests, a third approach is needed. All secondary teachers, regular and special, must utilize their expertise in learning theory to implement informal evaluation procedures. Even without formal testing information, teachers should examine closely the student's ability to deal with presentations and assignments in every classroom setting. Every teacher - Science, English, Math or Learning Disabilities - is able to evaluate how students process auditory and visual material in the specific subject

area. A simple checklist could be devised for use with students suspected to have difficulties.

An Adolescent Learning Behavior Checklist:

I. Evaluation of auditory skills

A. Listening

1. Discrimination: Does the student confuse words with similar sound configurations?
2. Memory: Does the student follow directions? Can he/she recall oral material presented previously?
3. Comprehension: Does the student understand needed vocabulary? Can he/she relate and interpret concepts presented through oral lecture or discussion?

B. Oral language

1. Articulation: Is the student's speech clear?
2. Vocabulary: Are words used appropriately? Is the student familiar with words specific to subject matter and age level?
3. Grammar: Is sentence structure correct as related to specific language environment?

C. Phonics skills

How does the student approach the oral reading

task? Are phonics skills used or evident?

II. Evaluation of visual skills

A. Reading - What is the student's reading level and is it at expectancy?

1. Letter identification, decoding skills: Does the student use phonic or visual approach? Is sight vocabulary adequate? Are there any reversals of letters or words?

2. Comprehension skills: Does the student understand what is read? Are questions and assignments related to reading answered in a relevant fashion?

B. Written language

1. Fine/visual motor skills: Does the student hold a pencil or pen correctly and comfortably? Is writing neat, correct, legible?

2. Spelling: Is spelling at grade level?

3. Composition: Does the student write complete and correct sentences? Does he/she write cohesive, meaningful paragraphs?

III. Evaluation of motor skills

A. Fine motor: Does the student perform fine motor tasks adequately? (arranging materials, using pencil,

microscope and slides, ruler, protractor, etc.)

B. Gross motor: Is the student coordinated in his/her movements? Does he/she move about the classroom/school/gym in an efficient manner?

This simple checklist looks at basic learning skills which can be readily observed by any teacher. The skills included are only those which are directly related to the learning process and which definitely should be mastered by the secondary student. A negative response to any question indicates a deficit area which must be accommodated and remediated by every teacher. The social/emotional characteristics which may or may not be related to learning disabilities are not included here and generally are most obvious to the teacher, so an identifying checklist would add little information.

Any test information (individual or group, norm or criterion referenced, formal or informal) is inadequate without item analysis. Every teacher must look at test performance to identify: (1) learning strengths and weaknesses, (2) the student's personal and instructional preferences, (3) behavioral characteristics which inhibit learning, (4) type of teacher needed to optimize interaction and learning, and (5) consideration of student's academic, vocational and

personal/social goals. All testing must contribute to the compilation of baseline data so that realiztic goals and objectives can be set, either in the regular or the special classroom.

The solutions provided here are simple ones. The difficulties inherent in evaluating exceptional adolescents cannot be solved instantly and yet many very obvious so solutions to the problems are being ignored. Secondary teachers must stop looking to other resources. More efficient use of available sources and skills can provide needed diagnostic information and a realistic starting point for helping learning disabled adolescents.

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